

## Canon James Pannett's Homily given at the Funeral of Canon Frank O'Sullivan 20th January 2021

These are strange times we are living through just now. We have had nearly a year of living dangerously. Like everyone across the globe we have been trying to avoid the virus and keep up the practice of our faith at the same time. We have almost been living in a permanent Advent, waiting and hoping for light in this terrible time of darkness. Waiting for an end to the tedium of this pandemic, waiting for the vaccine, waiting to spend more time with the family, waiting to hug and kiss again, even to shake hands, waiting to see one another's smiles without a mask, waiting to express our faith in communal worship. It is all very well to be told to wash your hands, wear a mask and give space, but when your Faith involves the community and communal worship means involving other people living their faith at the same time. then there is something lacking in our communication with one another.

Above all, it is the individual alone who goes to God - I have the responsibility to save my own soul, Christ lives in me. We used to say our own personal prayers, no matter what others might be doing. Canon Frank went further and developed a spirituality of unity with the emphasis on the communitarian aspects of the Christian life. He was aware of the presence of Christ in his brothers and sisters as well as himself. There were particular events in his life that brought this about. The Christ who loves me is the same Christ who loves my neighbour. The love of God in us involves giving and receiving, suffering and glory (2nd R). We read in Matthew 18 "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

This was the frustration that Canon Frank had to endure through his last days on earth and he found it well nigh impossible to cope with because he was a born communicator. For him his faith was "dialogue with the laity. about the love of God". He spent most of his priesthood figuring out ways of communication with others about God's love for them and how they could pass this love on to others. I suppose this must have been in his genes as he told me that his grandad had been part of the Docker's strike in 1889 with Cardinal Manning demanding the Docker's Tanner, six pence a day for all doing casual work in the London Docks.

Probably the most significant influence in his early years as a Priest was that of Abbey Wood. Like all Priests you got different experiences wherever you were posted and were invited to different courses along the way. Because of his time with the Youth Club at Vauxhall, he attended annual reunions right up to 2016, and the Y.C.W, Canon Frank was always ready to listen to another point of view that was not that of his own experiences. In 1966 he went to listen to a talk given by John Robinson, an influential Anglican theologian and Bishop of Woolwich. He mentioned an exciting new housing development plan that involved building 17,000 new homes for 60,000 people on Woolwich Arsenal, an old munition testing range on Woolwich Marshes at the edge of the Thames. After the talk he jokingly said to Bishop Robinson, "If you get a chance put in a good word for me." Little did he expect that three months later he would be appointed the priest in charge of the Local Ecumenical Project for Thamesmead. It was to be a team of eleven members only three of whom were Catholic. They met every Friday morning and planned, worked and prayed together and over the years strong friendships were formed. It was decided to share a church together, and a secondary school, but open to all denominations but the shared church was built with two chapels divided by a glass panel. The locals said "in case of Church Unity, break the glass." Canon Frank found the project fitted in with his desire to implement the Vatican II vision of a co-responsible Church - Priests and People working together to to implement the Church's mission to go out to the whole world. It was Canon Frank's experiment with Continuous Adult Education in the the Faith. He was printing 1500 twelve page leaflets every week, with snappy titles, on the Church, the Sacraments, the Bible etc. He certainly was not hiding the light of God under the bed!

In 1976 another influential phase entered his life. Canon Frank was invited to go on a Marriage

Encounter week-end and from then on this became a major factor in his thinking and spirituality. He went on various Encounter Conferences from then on and it became one of the peak experiences of his life. He led many week-ends, and from this experience started to concentrate his mind on providing engaged couples day in the parish in order to prepare young people for marriage.

This was the Lay Apostolate writ big. It has also branched out to supporting families facing problems in their marriage, helping people let go of past hurts and begin again, after forgiving themselves and their former partners for hurt they causes to others and the hurt others have done to them. This further developed to include the Teams of Our Lady as a support for those married today and trying to to live a spiritual life.

The final stage in Canon Frank's desire to have dialogue with the laity communicating the love of God , was when in 1985 he was appointed Parish Priest of New Malden. Together with the people of the parish,it was decided to the setting up of the Parish Cell System. Soon there were 70/80 people taking part in the cells, forming friendships and taking part in Adult Formation in the Faith . These parish Evangelising cells heralded the Mission statement "Go out to the whole world", grew because people shared the good News with others, In the cell movement, we try to make ourselves one with our neighbour in the love of God and try to find the strength to return that love in our actions in everyday life as part of the community in which we live passing on God;s love to others, aware that if fire is not passed on it dies out. Furthermore, unity is not achieved once and for all. It demands a constant effort to start again. When there is unity we experience immense joy, that joy promised by Jesus and for which we pray in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Canon Frank Retired in 1998 and you would expect that after such an active life he would be tired out and ready for a rest, but those of us who live in Purley know otherwise. He continued his mission to go out and spread the Good News. He has continued to run courses on Christian Marriage, Marriage preparation and Parenting. The Engaged Encounter and Marriage Preparation Course still go on they have now reached over 3,000 couples)

For Canon Frank, the hardest part of the pandemic is that it had shut churches and he was unable to communicate the Word of God with them, so it was a gratifying inspiration on Canon John's part to give him one last chance to communicate with the parish (*via the weekly on line parish newsletter*) and to share some thoughts about the coming of Christ. When we meet again what will you say if he asks how well you have prepared yourself spiritually to celebrate Christmas, whether or not you were able to get to church before lockdown. Did you decide on a way you were going to help the millions of people living in extreme poverty in many parts of the world?

So what benefit can we draw from Canon Frank's life and influence among us? Are we going to stay rooted in our own personal spirituality making sure we ourselves get into Heaven? Or are we going to adopt Canon Frank's idea of Vatican 2's communal spirituality of the Mystical Body of Christ, and we, all parts of the body. Just take the three key areas in his thinking: Christian Unity - are we prepared to listen to others with an open mind? Marriage Encounter: can we relate together and recover from hurt inflicted on each other? Cell Movement : will we act and pray together so as to grow in love with God and our neighbour?

Canon Frank lives on in you and in me. Let us pray for the energy to carry on the dialogue with one another, communicating the Word and our love of God to one another.

We read in the Gospel today `The World does not know you. I have made your name known to them so that the love with which you have loved me may also be in them."

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